

Journeys of Knowledge in *Aeneid* 6

Philip Hardie

When not engaged on smash-and-grab raids to bring back monstrous dogs or queens of the dead, heroes journey to the Underworld in order to learn the secrets of the universe as well as knowledge of a more personal kind. What kinds of intellectual and spiritual satisfaction does Aeneas find as he descends in the company of the Sibyl, and what is revealed to us, the readers, as Virgil leads us in the footsteps of his fictional characters?

When the shade of Anchises visits his son Aeneas in a dream towards the end of *Aeneid* 5 he tells him to come to the Underworld firstly in order to meet his father again, and secondly to learn of the future history of his race and of the city that he will found in Italy. To judge from Aeneas' impassioned plea to the Sibyl at 6.106–23, what moves him most is the desire to be reunited with his father Anchises, whose unexpected death in Sicily, *en route* to Italy, had so devastated him. In the event the reunion with Anchises is less than totally fulfilling, for Aeneas is no more able physically to embrace the wraith of his father when he meets him face to face in the Underworld than he had been when he encountered him in the dream in the previous book. On both occasions Anchises is as intangible and ultimately remote as Eurydice in *Georgics* 4 when Orpheus tried to grasp her as she vanished back into the Underworld, or as Aeneas' own mother Venus when she met him in disguise in *Aeneid* 1, or as the phantom of Aeneas' wife Creusa at the end of *Aeneid* 2 – or as the ghost of Dido at an earlier point in the journey through the Underworld. Indeed it is perhaps a sign of how important Dido really is to Aeneas that the words he addresses to her at 6.465–6, 'Do not remove yourself from my sight. Why do you flee me?' (*teque aspectu ne subtrahe nostro. I quem fugis?*), are also addressed by him to his vanishing father, in two instalments: the last two words, *quem fugis?*, he hurls at the fleeting dream vision at 5.742, and the first five, with the change of a word, form the climax of his appeal to his father's soul at 6.698, 'do not remove yourself from my embrace' (*teque amplexu ne subtrahe nostro*).

Journeying into the past

Aeneas does learn of his descendants and the future city, in the Parade of Roman Heroes that forms the climax of his visit to the Underworld. But before he reaches that point, he learns many other things as well. Like Odysseus, whose journey to the land of the dead in *Odyssey* 11 is the Homeric model for Aeneas' descent to the Underworld, Aeneas learns about both the past and the future, but Virgil gives the chronology of revelation a structure not present in Homer's version. The spatial journey from the forecourt of the 'house of Orcus' to the inmost sanctum of the Elysian fields is punctuated by meetings with characters from Aeneas' own past that retrace backwards his story so far. First he meets the helmsman Palinurus, who had died only at the end of the previous book. He is still this side of Acheron, not just because he is only recently dead, but also because as one of the unburied dead he may not be ferried across by Charon. Secondly he meets Dido, who had died at the end of book 4. The sense of unwinding the past is reinforced by Dido's own reverision to the beginning of her story, now reunited with her former husband Sychaeus. Aeneas then regresses to the Trojan War, and meets Deiphobus, who died on the night of the Sack of Troy in

book 2. It is logical that in the Elysian Fields he should finally return to his own beginning in the person of his father.

The curiously unsatisfying meeting with his father is the climax to the similarly unrewarding encounters with the other characters from his past. In each case Virgil stresses the difficulty Aeneas has in recognising them, in the case of Palinurus and Dido because of the surrounding gloom, and of Deiphobus because of his horribly mutilated condition. The stern Sibyl will not let Aeneas take Palinurus with him across the Acheron or spend more time talking to Deiphobus, and Dido turns away from his attempts to say sorry. In each case all that Aeneas achieves is the resolution of an uncertainty about the manner or fact of their death. The Virgilian Underworld is a place where things are made clear, but for Aeneas this is a purely external kind of knowledge rather than any kind of interior illumination or psychic integration.

Investing in futures

The point at which he meets the person nearest and dearest to him, his father, is also the point at which the series of private revelations Aeneas experiences comes to an end, to be replaced by the grandest kinds of what might be called 'official knowledge'. The trigger for these revelations is a question put by Aeneas that reflects the reminders during the first part of his journey of the sufferings of those close to him: why, he asks Anchises as he watches the swarms of souls waiting to return in new bodies to the world above, do they have such a dread desire for the light of the sun? The answer: it is only after they drink from the river of Lethe, so forgetting what their previous lives had been like. In this place of forgetting Anchises first reveals to Aeneas knowledge of the ultimate philosophical mysteries about the nature of the universe and of the soul. This is knowledge of the timeless truths of nature. Secondly he throws the movement back through time of Aeneas' otherworldly journey into reverse, as he reveals the truths of history, reviewing the whole future stretch of time in the shape of the parade of unborn Roman heroes. From Aeneas' point of view this is prophecy, but from Virgil's reader's point of view this is the memory bank of history.

The marked contrast between the journey back in time in the first part of the Underworld, and the journey into the future made through the Parade of Heroes sharply focuses a tension that underlies the *Aeneid* as a whole, between the temptation for the exiled Trojans to return to their past, to regress to some version of Troy as it was, and the need to go forward into a strange and difficult future. There can be no homecoming to the past; this is perhaps one reason why Aeneas' meetings with people from his past are so distressing. On the other hand what kind of personal relationship can Aeneas have with the heroes of a Rome that will not be founded for centuries after his death? Like Moses, he will never see his promised land.

Cultural maps

Underworlds, with their schematic topographies, are maps that cultures make for themselves of the order of things, places where

the values and beliefs that are often difficult to make out in the hurry and confusion of our daily lives can be clearly laid out and given the status of final truths. The Virgilian Underworld offers clarity both to Aeneas concerning his own past and future, and to the Roman reader concerning the philosophical and historical underpinning of the Roman world. The verb *pandere* 'uncover, reveal' is used both in the poet's invocation to the gods of the Underworld at the beginning (267) and to introduce Anchises' speech to Aeneas (723): the journey to the Underworld is a revelation, an apocalypse, both for Aeneas and for Virgil's reader. The two kinds of pupil collapse into one in the famous lines at 851–3 in which Anchises sums up the Roman mission, addressing a second-person singular 'Roman' that is at once Aeneas (he after all is Anchises' only direct audience) and Every(Ro)man:

But you, O Roman, must remember that you have to guide the nations by your authority, for this is to be your skill, to graft tradition onto peace, to show mercy to the conquered, and to wage war until the haughty are brought low (translated by W.F.Jackson-Knight).

The temporal articulation of the Virgilian Underworld sketches out a journey from past to future for Virgil's Roman reader as well, from the Sack of Troy as recalled in the encounter with Deiphobus, to the triumphs of Augustus, from the Homeric and mythological picture of the afterlife in the first part of the Underworld to the up-to-date theology and philosophy of the Elysian fields. It is also a journey from Greek literature and culture to Roman civilisation: the meeting between Aeneas and the shade of Anchises is modelled on the prologue to Ennius' early second-century B.C. historical Roman epic, the *Annals*, in which Ennius dreamed that the phantom of Homer appeared to him to announce that the real soul of Homer had been reincarnated, according to Pythagorean doctrine, in the breast of Ennius. This is a vivid way of saying that a Roman poet has now taken over the torch from the greatest Greek poet. Anchises' meeting with Aeneas is confirmation that *pater Aeneas* now succeeds his father to become the father of the Roman race, while the allusion to the Ennian prologue hints that Virgil takes over from his poetic father, Ennius, as the Roman Homer and Rome's national poet.

Virgilian afterlives

Virgil's powerful reshaping of his Homeric model has in turn been reapplied to journeys of knowledge by later centuries with different religious and philosophical beliefs. The late fifth-century Christian writer Fulgentius interpreted the whole of the *Aeneid* as a philosophical allegory containing glimmerings of Christian truth; Aeneas' journey to visit Anchises is a journey to God the Father, who fittingly gives an account of the universe He has created. The greatest rewriting of Aeneid 6 is Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Here a journey through the afterlife, from Inferno to Paradise via Purgatory, is both an encyclopaedic map of the beliefs of the Christian Middle Ages, and a journey of spiritual fulfilment for Dante as Everyman, that combination of public and private knowledge and illumination which Aeneas fails to achieve. In the *Divine Comedy* Virgil takes over the function of the Sibyl in Aeneid 6, guiding Dante through Inferno and Purgatory, but is unable to accompany him on into Paradise. Virgil of course can go no further because he lived and died before the birth of Christ, but his disappearance in the thirtieth canto of *Purgatorio* may also signal that *Aeneid* 6 cannot be a model for the full spiritual integration that Dante will go on to realise in Paradise. Dante is as griefstricken when his 'dearest father' Virgil vanishes as is Orpheus at the death of Eurydice, or as Aeneas at his inability to embrace his father, but he is immediately consoled by the appearance of his 'lady', Beatrice. An allusion to the beginning of *Aeneid* 4 invites us to see the meeting with Beatrice as a rewriting of Aeneas' failure to communicate with Dido in the Underworld, and Beatrice now takes over

from the character Virgil to guide the character Dante through Paradise – as the poet Dante has taken over from the poet Virgil as writer of a Christian 'epic'. In this more consoling world personal love and Christian duty walk hand in hand.

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For more on Virgil see <http://vergil.classics.upenn.edu/home>